

WHAT DO THE UNCHURCHED BELIEVE?

- Every time they step on the brakes of their cars, they exhibit tremendous faith in gadgets that most of them know nothing about.
- Each time they go out in public, they demonstrate faith in the behavior and morals of mankind, believing that they will not be shot or mugged.
- When they take a bite of food that has been prepared at a restaurant by a chef they never see or do not know, they show the faith they possess, believing that it was properly cooked and not poisoned.
- Each time they make a bank deposit, they engage in an act of faith, believing that their money will be returned to them, perhaps with interest.

The issue is not whether the unchurched have faith; rather, it is where they place their faith.

Most unchurched people have some relationship with religion, spirituality, and faith matters. However, for them the role and nature of faith looks and operates differently than it does for the two-thirds of the people who are churchied.

What Do They Believe?

Indisputably, the unchurched are a study in contradictions when it comes to matters of faith.

- Most unchurched people are not overly religious or spiritual, yet 70 percent call themselves Christian.
- Three-quarters of them own a Bible (usually the King James Version), but few read the contents.
- Almost half of them state that having a close, personal relationship with God is one of their top priorities in life, but surprisingly few of them do much to facilitate that bond.

To get beyond the apparent inconsistencies and complexities and figure out how to minister to unchurched people, we must understand their perception of the Christian faith. Many of them think of the Bible as an outdated book of rules, but a number of them believe it to be a relevant, useful guidebook to modern living. How they apply the perceived insights from Scripture depends on what they believe those insights to be.

General Beliefs

- Two-thirds of the unchurched consider their religious faith to be very important. Almost two-thirds of those individuals give strong (as opposed to moderate) affirmation to this notion.
- Consistent with their own low-key pursuits of faith, most unchurched adults say that a person can lead a full and satisfying life even if he or she does not incorporate or develop a faith. Six out of 10 unchurched adults accept this idea as accurate, while one-third rejects it. For most people, then, faith is an optional pursuit, a kind of bonus benefit that may prove to be useful.

Beliefs About Deity

The more we explore the beliefs of the unchurched, the more contradictions we encounter.

- Seven out of 10 unchurched adults believe that God created the universe.

The nature of the God in which they believe, however, leaves much to be desired.

- Less than half of the unchurched (47 percent) believe that “God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who still rules the world today.”

One must wonder how the 23 percent who claim that God created the world but does not rule it today would explain this view. Did God create the world, watch for a while, and then vanish? Did He create the universe but then lose His dominion over it? Have these individuals really thought through the spiritual implications of this perspective? Most likely not.

- Twenty percent of unchurched adults say that the term “God” refers to a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.
- Ten percent contends that God is the full realization of human potential.
- Six percent say everyone is God.
- Another six percent believe that there are many different gods.
- Eight percent simply state that there is no such thing as God.
- Note: Fifty percent of unchurched people have a deficient view of God.

Beliefs about Jesus are no more consistent.

- Two-thirds of the unchurched contend that Jesus was born to a virgin. But His miraculous birthing fails to impress many of them.
- Half of whom believe that Jesus sinned while He was on Earth.
- Half also argue that He was crucified and died but that He never had a physical resurrection.

They do not do much better with the Holy Spirit.

- Almost two-thirds of the unchurched deny the existence of the Third Person of the Trinity, saying that the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God’s presence or power but is not a living entity.

Beliefs About the Bible

In a rare display of theological consistency, we found that 38 percent of the unchurched agreed that the Bible is totally accurate in all that it teaches, which is nearly identical to the 39 percent who said that they perceive the Bible to be either the literal Word of God or His inspired Word without error.

However, those individuals were divided among:

- Those who strongly agree that the Bible is completely accurate (22 percent) and
- Those who are only somewhat convinced of that truth (16 percent).
- Of course, a majority (52 percent) do not buy into the idea at all, and
- another 10 percent do not know what to think.

Beliefs About Salvation

The spiritual deception of the unchurched is perhaps most extensive regarding salvation. In broad

terms, we find that they generally reject the necessity of accepting Christ as Savior and instead believe that through good deeds a person can earn his or her way into heaven—or even that after death there will not be any condemnation of anyone, no matter how a person lived life.

The contradiction here is that only:

- One out of every four unchurched adults argues that sin is an outdated concept.
- Most of these people accept the existence of sin but do not believe that sin will have an eternal effect on an individual's destiny.
- Fewer than one out of five unchurched believe that there is no afterlife,
- The remainder are divided between believing that everyone will experience the same, generally positive outcome and believing that a person can earn eternal salvation through a preponderance of good deeds.

Amazingly, most of the unchurched believe that they will go to heaven after they die, although few attribute that gift to the grace of God, their own profession of faith, and their own acknowledgment of sin.

What Does This All Mean?

While there is a hardcore segment that is not ready to be reached yet with God's love and truth, there are millions of people disconnected from the church who are ripe for reconnection.

- One out of every seven is likely to visit a church in the coming three to six months, seeking a spiritual home.
- Twice as many (one-third of the unchurched) admit that they are more likely to look for spiritual answers to address the problems and challenges they face in life than they were three years ago.

What Can be Done to Increase the Interest of the Unchurched in Returning to the Fold?

Here are some possibilities.

- Give an unchurched friend a copy of a modern translation of the Bible. The New King James Version is a very good translation. This might help God's Word come alive for these individuals. If you have the chance to discuss life's issues with an unchurched person—and you identify key issues on which you have differing opinions—you might “encourage” him or her into examining his or her Bible with you. You could explain how you arrived at your stand through the application of biblical content.
- Take St. Peter's exhortation seriously: Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15). Most Americans, even the unchurched, are seeking hope.
- Think through how you could sensitively but persuasively (not offensively or aggressively) communicate the reasons for your faith. Be sure to use practical, non-religious terminology. Avoid “Code language”. They won't understand it.
- Grace is a concept that millions of Americans do not understand. Yet it is a cornerstone concept for people to comprehend if they are going to receive God's grace offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Reflect on practical ways to describe what both the concept and the experience of that grace has meant to you.
- Learn to listen for the underlying foundations of people's arguments. Often you will discover that their fundamental assumptions include the rejection of absolute moral truth. Without becoming argumentative or philosophically obtuse, develop the skill of

identifying the fallacy of people's truth assumptions, and learn how to propose an alternative for them to consider. St. Paul was a great role model in this regard: He sought to understand the cultural assumptions of his audience, and then he discussed a divergent but reasonable point of view in ways that reached the people where they were. (see Acts 17).

- Before you invite your unchurched associates to a worship service, take the time to examine your church through their eyes. Is your church accessible and comprehensible to someone who is not a believer, has little knowledge of the Bible, or is unfamiliar with how the church works? Ask the question, "How do we process first time visitors into our Church?".
- After assessing your church through their eyes, if you discover that it is not really unchurched-friendly, take the initiative to do something about it. Your church can change for the better without compromising its, vision, values, worship or beliefs.

Parts of this were taken and adapted from *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* by George Barna (Regal Books, Ventura, California 93003), copyright ©2002 George Barna.